

Washington and Lee University,
Lee Chapel
University campus, on the south-
eastern slope of the ridge
Lexington (independent city)
Virginia

HABS No. VA-568-C

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL NAD DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY, LEE CHAPEL

HABS No. VA-568-C

Location: On the campus of Washington and Lee University, on the southeastern slope of the ridge, facing the portico of the Center Building (Washington Hall).
Lexington, Virginia.

Owner: Washington and Lee University

Present use: Memorial chapel, used as an auditorium for some academic and cultural assemblies. A museum on the ground floor displays historical items owned by the university pertaining to Lee and to Washington. A large vault on this lower level is the burial place of Lee and many of his family.

Brief statement of significance: The Lee Chapel was declared a Registered National Historic Landmark in 1961 by the U.S. Department of the Interior which stated that "This site possesses exceptional value in commemorating and illustrating the history of the United States." A monument to the life of Robert E. Lee, it commemorates especially the final achievement of the Confederate General, his leadership in education as a way of rebuilding the South and of restoring the unity of the nation. This small brick chapel was built in 1867 under the supervision of Lee when he was president of Washington College. The burial place of Lee, it is visited by about 35,000 persons annually.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

A. Physical History.

1. Original and subsequent owners: Washington College, since 1871 named Washington and Lee University.
2. Date of erection: 1867
3. Architect: The chapel seems to be the result of collaboration of several persons. General Lee's son, General Custis Lee, then a professor at Virginia Military Institute, "selected a simple Victorian design for the chapel." [Lee Chapel (1963), p. 3.] Major Thomas H. Williamson, professor of Engineering and Architecture at Virginia Military Institute, made the working drawings and specifications. A drawing of original plans in the possession of Washington and Lee bears notations identified as the handwriting of General R.E. Lee, and others in the handwriting of General Custis Lee. A xerox of a photograph of this drawing is attached.
[Bosserman, J.N., "A Shrine Preserved", Arts in Virginia, V, 2, p. 8.]

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

A. Physical History.

4. Notes on original plan and construction:

On July 18, 1866, the Trustees of Washington College at Lee's request authorized a chapel "to be built at a cost not exceeding \$10,000." On November 15, 1866, the restriction was removed. [Bosserman, J.N., "A Shrine Preserved", Arts in Virginia, V, 2, p. 7.]

Work was begun by late summer. There followed a delay and in mid-April 1867 it was announced that the work was resumed. Lee informed the Trustees in June 1868 of the completion of the chapel, calling it "a pleasing as well as useful addition to the College buildings." "Besides the audience room for religious worship, which will contain about 700 persons, there is a large room in the basement appropriate for lecture room, and two others suitable for offices or recitation rooms."

[Crenshaw, Roanoke Times, Oct. 6, 1963, E, p. 8.]

5. Notes on known alterations and additions:

1883 - Addition to chapel for Lee crypt and Recumbent Statue.

The Lee Memorial Association, organized in 1870 to erect a monument in honor of Lee, had commissioned Edward V. Valentine of Richmond to make a recumbent statue of Lee. The statue was completed and received at Washington and Lee in April 1875. After a delay in finding a suitable design for a monument, the Association accepted in May, 1877, a design offered by J. Crawford Neilson, architect of Baltimore, for a rectangular apse at the rear of the chapel. As described at the time, it "consists of a fireproof apse, an addition to the rear of the chapel, conforming in material and design to the chapel itself. The lower story is a crypt of massive stone masonry, and the superstructure is built of brick. The interior is encrusted with brick and Cleveland stone, of subdued tints, and is lighted from above."

The cornerstone was laid on November 29, 1878, on the northeast corner of the building about 10" above ground. The building of the addition was carried forward during 1879 and 1880, but the funds of the Association became exhausted before the roof and the interior were complete. In the spring of 1882 the Association gave the title to the crypt and marble statue to Washington and Lee University which appropriated further funds for completion and agreed to perpetual care.

Following ceremonies on June 28, 1883, inaugurating the crypt and unveiling the statue, a pamphlet was printed which gives the following description:

The dimensions of the mausoleum on the ground plan are 31 x 36 feet. The lower story, which is constructed of coralline limestone to correspond with the basement of the chapel, is a crypt containing cells of receptacles for twenty-eight bodies....

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

A. Physical History.

5. Notes on known alterations and additions:

1883 - Addition

"The chamber containing the monument is directly over the crypt and is of brick like the corresponding part of the chapel. The floor of the chamber is tessellated with white-veined marble and encaustic tiles. The walls consist of panels of grayish Indiana marble enframed in dark Baltimore pressed brick, and surmounted by semicircular compartments which can be used for basso-rilievo medallions. In one of these compartments, immediately facing the chapel is inscribed the name of General Lee, together with the dates of his birth and death. Immediately around the base of the sarcophagus is a border of dark tiling. The tessellated floor is on the level of the platform of the chapel, which is raised three feet above the floor of the audience chamber.... The figure and couch, which are of statuary marble, are mounted on a sarcophagus simple almost to severity in its order, and which rests on a granite base course. The sides of the sarcophagus are composed of two marble panels each, the space between the panels bearing, in basso-rilievo, on the one side the Lee coat of arms, and on the other the arms of Virginia. The head and foot consist of one panel each, the former being ornamented by a simple cross, the other bearing the legend.... An ante-chamber connects the monument chamber with the chapel and is separated from the former by iron doors."

[Ceremonies Connected with the Inauguration ..., June 28, 1883, pp. 5-14.]

The auditorium of the chapel opens to the addition through the original round-headed arch at the rear of the rostrum. The entrance to the Statue Chamber is a Tudor arch.

1962-1963 - The restoration of the Lee Chapel, provided by a grant of \$370,000 from the Ford Motor Company Fund.
Architects: Clark, Nexsen & Owen - Lynchburg, Virginia.
Consultants: Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean - Boston, Mass.
Mr. William G. Perry
Contractor: John P. Pettyjohn Co. - Lynchburg, Va.
Date of work: June 1962 - July 1963
Restoration based on date of 1883

"Every effort was made to keep the appearance of the Chapel as it was in 1883. Although the original wood structural system has been replaced with concrete and steel, all of the original wood finishes and flooring have been replaced insofar as possible. Existing plaster walls, with the exception of necessary patching, remain in place." Systems of heating, lighting, airconditioning, humidification, and fireprotection were installed as inconspicuously as possible. With the exception of General Lee's office which was restored, the museum on the ground floor was remodeled.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

B. Historical events and persons associated with building:

When Lee came to Lexington to be president of Washington College in the fall of 1865, the college was struggling to survive. Under his leadership the enrollment increased, the curriculum expanded, the physical plant improved. The chapel was built at his request and under his direction. On the lower level he maintained his office. Daily worship services were held in the auditorium.

Lee's funeral services were held in the chapel on October 15, 1870. At that time he was buried beneath the chapel near the center of the present Lee Museum.

In 1883, June 28, a ceremony was held for the inauguration of the Lee family vault and the unveiling of the Recumbent Statue. The occasion drew a large gathering, said to be eight to ten thousand, including many of the leaders of the Confederacy. In 1928 the Museum was opened on the lower level. Here are displayed historical items associated with the Lees and with Washington. Of special importance is a group of portraits known as "The Lee Family Collection." Among these are the Charles Willson Peale portrait of George Washington and the Theodore Pine portrait of Robert E. Lee, which hang on the wall behind the rostrum in the auditorium of the chapel.

C. Sources of information:

Primary sources found at Washington and Lee University:

Clark, Nexsen and Owen, Architects. Preservation and Restoration of Lee Chapel, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va. November, 1963. A Report. Includes photographs of details made in 1960 and 1961.

Measured Drawings, August 1961.

As-Built Drawings, March 1962.

Sketch of original plan for the Chapel. [In vault of Treasurer's Office, Washington and Lee University.]

Photograph by Michael Miley of Lee's funeral showing view of Chapel. [In files of Rockbridge Historical Society.]

Secondary sources:

Washington and Lee University. Lee Chapel. 1963. A pamphlet.
Bosserman, J. Norwood. "A Shrine Preserved", Arts in Virginia. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Vol. V, No. 2, Winter, 1965, pp. 6-11.

Crenshaw, Ollinger. General Lee's College. New York, Random House, 1969.

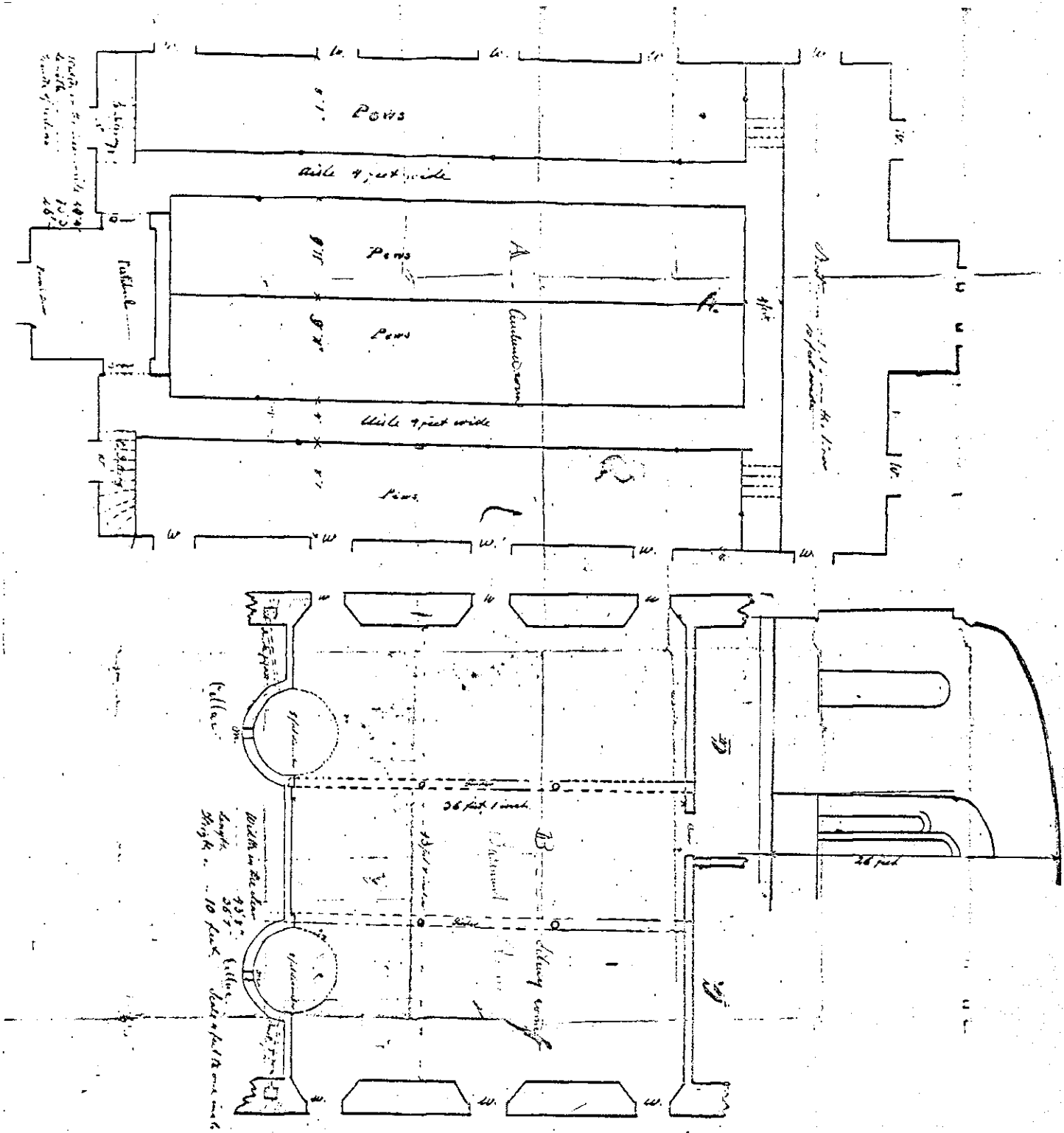
The Roanoke Times. October 6, 1963. Section E.

Ceremonies Connected with the Inauguration of the Mausoleum and the Unveiling of the Recumbent Figure of General Robert Edward Lee at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va., June 28, 1883. Richmond, Va., West, Johnston Co., 1883.

McClung, James W. The Historical Significance of Rockbridge County, Virginia. Staunton, McClure Co., 1939.

See also: Lyle, Royster, Jr. and Simpson, Pamela. The Architecture of Historic Lexington. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1977.

Prepared by: Mrs. McCluer Gilliam
Lexington, Virginia
February, 1969



Kerox copy of photograph of sketch of original plan
for the Chapel, Washington College. (Now The Lee Chapel,
Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia)
Original drawing in vault of Treasurer's Office,
Washington and Lee University - Valuable papers folder.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION.

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural interest and merit: A Victorian chapel in a simplified rendering of the Romanesque in church architecture. It has no stylistic connection with the classical style of the rest of the university. "Visitors come, not to study its architecture, but to see the burial place of Robert E. Lee." Bosserman, J.N., "A Shrine Preserved", Arts in Virginia, V, 2, p.7.
2. Condition: Excellent. In 1963 the chapel was restored with care and thoroughness, based on the date 1883 when the addition was completed. At the time of restoration in 1963 systems of fire detection, heating, airconditioning, humidification, and supplementary lighting were installed as inconspicuously as possible. The original wood structural system was replaced by steel and concrete. Other than this, the chapel is largely original.

B. Description of Exterior:

Measured drawings (1961), As-Built drawings (1962), and the report of the architects for the restoration, including detailed photographs, may be seen at Washington and Lee University.

1. Number of floors: Three (Ground, Main and Balcony)
2. Layout: Rectangular with a square bell-tower at center front and rectangular addition at rear.
3. Foundations: Rusticated limestone with dressed limestone watertable.
4. Wall construction: Red brick. In restoration the main masonry bearing walls were structurally sound and unchanged.
5. Structural system, framing: Extensive structural reconstruction in 1963. Original wood system was replaced with steel and concrete.
6. Openings: Entrance has semi-circular arch of brick recessed in three stages. Semi-circular transom divided with two arches and circle. Double doors have carved decoration adapted from Renaissance sources. Semi-circular corbelling over the door. Windows with semi-circular arches are double-hung, have diamond panes. Exterior woodwork is painted white.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL.

B. Description of Exterior (continued):

7. Roof: A-roof. Alternating bands of hexagonal butt, rectangular butt, rounded butt. Slate. Original slate was reinstalled after supporting structure was replaced.

The roof of the bell-tower is pyramid with concave ridges. Stamped metal tile roof.

8. Clock in tower: Faces on three sides of tower.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Main floor is auditorium with balcony at rear and two sides. Auditorium opens through archway to vestibule which opens through arch to statue chamber. Curved stairways on each side at back of auditorium lead to balcony.
2. Wall and ceiling finish: Reconstruction in 1963 required replacement of the ceiling of the auditorium. Existing plaster walls remain in place, though some patching was done. Investigation revealed that original wall color was a very light buff or off white, and this has been matched.
3. Flooring: Original flooring was reinstalled after concrete subflooring was laid. Originally had carpeting on rostrum and in aisles. No specific design could be verified. A plain carpet has been installed.
4. Trim: The original color of paint on woodwork, pews and organ was a very light blue (white with a hint of blue.) A photograph dated 1870 showed light finish and natural walnut top trim and scroll on pews. After 1883 the pews had been painted dark brown. In 1963 the original light color was restored.

Pews were reconditioned and slightly modified (2" added to front of seats and wedged to slight angle) for comfort. Spacing of pews was changed to attain satisfactory relationship with balcony columns, necessitating the removal of one pew from center and from each side section - a loss of 26 seats.

The pipe organ, built by Henry Erben of New York City and installed in 1872, has been completely reconditioned. It has the same outward appearance that it originally had.

Capitals and columns supporting the gallery are simplified adaptations of Romanesque style.

Memorial plaques have been painted to match the walls, the lettering buffed.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL

C. Description of Interior (continued):

5. All original hardware was reused where possible. New hardware matching existing original. Brass knobs on front doors were supplied by Mr. William G. Perry from his collection, matching the period and design of original.
6. Lighting: The original concept of lighting, which was later changed to rows of bare bulbs across the ceiling, has been replaced. Electrical fixtures made from designs modeled on original oil light fixtures have been mounted on walls where fixtures originally existed and around the outside base of the balcony. These fixtures, brass with frosted globes and chimneys, were designed by W. Addison Staples, architect of Lynchburg, Va. These fixtures are also used in the Museum where an original one from which they were designed may be seen. Lighting for the Recumbent Statue is inset in coves in the chamber ceiling. Spot lights in the ceiling.

Prepared by Mrs. McCluer Gilliam after
consulting
Mr. Nathaniel Neblett, architect
Lynchburg, Va.
February 13, 1969

Reviewed for HABS by: Druscilla J. Null
September 1983